

# The Athenian Mercury.

Saturday, December 29 1694.

Quest. 1. **I**s there any such Bird as the Phœnix? Or was there ever any such?

*Ans.* If there been't, the Poets have been mistaken in *Good Company*, for almost all sorts and ranks of Writers, *Historians, Statesmen, Critics, Fathers*, have believ'd and reported it: Nay some would persuade us the *H. Scriptures* themselves assert it, which if 'twere but true, the case were decided. The places they produce are that, *Ps. 13.* "The righteous shall flourish like a Palm-Tree, in the Greek, *ὡς φοῖβος*, as the *Phœnix*, and again *Job 29. 18.* I shall dye in my Nest, and multiply my days as [the sand] our *Version*, but the Latin here, *ut Phœnix*; as a *Phœnix*. Thus did *Tertullian Epiphanius, St. Clement, Origen*, and others interpret it, and *Beda* long after, whose Authority sway'd so much with some learned men among the *moderns*, that they have also embrac'd and defended the reality of the Bird, as *Pamelius, Turrianus* and others, and Mr. *Patrick Young* was so eager on't that he frankly professes, if he be mistaken in the thing, he had rather err with so many of the Fathers than be in the right, contrary to their Judgment. Nor do they only affirm this, and describe such a Bird; or among prophane Writers, *Pliny*, and *Solinus*, but *Aristides, Philostratus*, and some think *Plutarch* too, who mentions, *φοῖνιξ ὁ ἐν κέφελος*, the Brains of a *Phœnix*, as some translate him. However, *Historians* assure us, that a *Phœnix* has been actually seen at such and such times in *Egypt*, in the Consulship of *Paulus Fabius* and *L. Vitellius*, which is recorded by *Tacitus* himself. *Dion* tells us, a *Phœnix* was seen among the presages of *Tiberius* his Death (who was more honour'd than *Augustus*, who had only an Owl to forebode his) and *Aurelius Victor* and *Suidas* say another was seen in the time of *Claudius*. Nay we are told that *A. U. C.* 800, there was one taken, and brought to *Rome* (they had better luck then the poor Fellow in *Heliodorus*, who was forc'd to put off his mistress with a *Phœnicopher* instead of a *Phœnix*, or *Helio-gabalus*, who invited his Guests to a Dish of *Phœnixes*, but was forc'd to put 'em off with each a thousand pounds in Gold instead on't). But yet further, the Emperor of *Ethiopia*, in his Letters to the Pope, assures him the *Phœnix* was born in his Country (we suppose, Far off, beneath the mountains of the moon) and the Jews have a pretty story of the same Bird, that all Birds and Beasts besides that, did at *Eve's* persuasion, eat of the forbidden Tree as well as *Adam*, on which they became mortal, whereas the *Phœnix* not eating, at every thousand years end renews his Lease of Life, as we shou'd have done if we had not fallen. Nay *Ezekiel*, a Jewish *Tragedian* who wrote in Greek, the *Exodus* of the Children of *Israel*, finds the very Nest of him at *Elim* in the *Wilderness*. Of the Critics, *Cardan* and *Scaliger* agree in this, tho they differ in so many other things, that the modern *Navigators* have discover'd such a Bird in *India*, whose description they give us, *Cardan* especially, distinctly enough, and that, the Natives call it *Semenda*. If there needs more, we can clinch all with *Infalibility*, for no worse an Author than *Cambden* tells us that his Holiness Pope *Clement* the 1st, sent the Feather of a *Phœnix* to the Irish Rebels in Queen *Elizabeth's* time, to encourage 'em in their Rebellion against her. So precious a Relick, that unless he had sent 'em the *Archangels Feather*, which *Erasmus* mentions, he cou'd never have outdone it. And 'twou'd be very uncivil still to question the Existence of the *Phœnix* when his Holiness himself has so plainly asserted it, and so Sagacious a Nation believ'd it.

What shall we do then against such a Consensus Vere-

rum and *Nubes Testium*, an Army of (more then Irish) Evidence? Why, if we can but get off the first, we don't value the *last*, nor are so much concern'd for all that went between. And this we think may be done without any great difficulty, it being certain that the good Fathers were deceiv'd by the Equivocation of the word *Phœnix*, which in the Greek signifies either a *Phœnix*, or a *Palm-Tree*, they being generally ignorant of the Hebrew, and ready to snatch at any thing which they thought might prove or illustrate any mystery of the Christian Faith. Now that the word *φοῖνιξ* here does certainly signify a *Palm-Tree*, not this fancy'd Bird, will be very evident to any who consider either the Context, or the original. In that out of the *Psalms* the whole Context clears it: "The Righteous shall flourish as a [Palm-Tree] and shall spread abroad as a Cedar in Libanus, such as he planted in the House of the Lord (perhaps referring to the Trees about their *Trescoute*, or *Oratorys*)" shall flourish in the Courts of the House of our God. Where all the allusion is plainly to Trees, how then comes a Bird to clap in among 'em contrary to the Rule of Comparisons? And again, the word *φοῖνιξ* in the Hebrew clearly signifies a *Palm-Tree*, as *ἡ ῥίζον ἰαμαρ*, &c. But no where this fine Bird that's so much talkt of: Tho *Bochart* is here very happy in his Conjecture, as well as in a thousand other instances, often purely his own, tho now *Pliny* helps him, who thinks that both name and story of the fabulous *Phœnix* took its original from the *Palm-Tree*, some of which are so fruitful that if a Branch falls to the ground, it takes root, (like our *Ash-Keys*) and grows into a New Tree. Let us add our fancy too, that the parching up the Roots of the Old Palm, may be all that's meant by the *Phœnix* Nest being fir'd by the Sun-beams, unless it shou'd be thought to have a further reference to the New Tyre, rising from the ashes of the old. The other Text is yet plainer, the true rendering being [I shall multiply thy days as the Sand, not the *Phœnix*, nor *Palm-Tree* neither; however the 70 seem to have taken a particular Care that their words shou'd not be interpreted of any such fabulous *Phœnix* (a *Literal* pick it seems among the *Egyptians*) and therefore translate, *ὡς ὁ σάχος φοῖνιχος*, as the Trunk of a *Palm-Tree*, which is sense; but we'd fain know what any body can make of the Trunk of a *Phœnix*? These Scriptures therefore doubtless it was which misled *Clement* and the rest, (for they quote 'em,) and these being vindicated to their proper sense, there will not remain much strength in an *allusive authority*, few or none now doubting but that the Good Fathers were sometimes mistaken as well as other men. To which, if we add, that *Maximus*, a man of as good sense as any of 'em, positively rejects it, and most others only mention it with a *dicunt, ferunt, aiunt*, &c. There needs then no more, we think, fully to take off this objection. For *Pliny*, tho accounted fabulous enough o' Conscience, yet to do him Justice, he himself speaks as if he did not believe a word of this story. "Ferunt, says he, *an omnes nobilem in Arabia Phœnicem, nescio an fabulose*. "They talk of a *Phœnix* in Arabia, the most noble of any other Bird, but I can't tell whether they lie or no; and he says of that in *Claudius* his time; "None doubted but that 'twas a *Flam*. And *Tacitus* owns, many thought no better of that before the Death of *Tiberius*, and speaks of the whole as an old wives Fable. There might be, we grant, some strange Birds, as well as Beasts, sometimes seen in *Africa*, and brought from thence, and very probably when they had taken one they knew not what to call, they made a *Phœnix* of him, (as poor *Lazarillo* was turn'd into a Fish, and the Ragged *Colts* to a *Sturgeon*)

but



but still no such thing as the true *Phoenix* is describ'd, which seems to be the sense of *Tacitus*, when he says the *Egyptian Phoenix* had. "*Nihil ex his quæ, verus memoria firmaret.*" For *Plutarch's* brains of a *Phoenix*, 'tis evident the Translator mistook his meaning, since it ought to have been turn'd, the fruit of the Palm-tree. As for the boast of the *Ethiopian* (we suppose the *Abyssinian*) Emperor, that this strange Bird was bred in his Territories; *Pellastorgius* and *Nicophorus* were of the same mind; tho' he's generally esteem'd a Native of *Arabia*; he indeed joyns *Ethiopia*, and is often confounded with it; but 'tis pity he had not sent one of 'em for a Present to his Holiness, to requite him for the many good Relicks the Jesuits and Fryars brought into his Country. For the Jewish Stories, tho' they mention the *Phoenix* in many of their Books, Antient and Modern, their *Zohar*, their *Talmudic Writings*, *Talme*, *Midras*, &c. and *Kimchi*, *R. Solomon Jarchi*, and several others of their Topping Authors give us descriptions of his Age and Properties; yet the Reader may chuse whether he'll believe 'em, any more than all the Wonders of *Bekemoth* and *Leviathan*, they being of equal credit with their *Tragadon*, who out of the three-score and twelve Palm-trees which the *Israelites* found at *Elim*, makes one *Phoenix*, when he might as well have made as many as they found Trees. For *Cardan*, and *Sadiger*, *Bochart* proves very plainly, that they, as well as their Authors were mistaken, who by the *Semenda*, *Semendal*, or *Semendar* (for so many ways 'tis written) understood the *Phoenix*, whereas the word is no other than a corruption of *Salamander*, bred out of *Flames*; if we'll believe the *Rabbinic* and *Arabian* Writings, who talk much of *Salamanders* Wood, which he that wears a Coat of, may be sure he shall never be burnt. There remains nothing now to get clear of besides a little Musty Infallibility; The Pope sent a Feather of the *Phoenix*, as a Present, therefore infallibly there must be such a Bird, as sure as there's a Condore, or Griffin in *Aloumorasia*, one of whose smaller Feathers (the biggest then were *Whiskers*) an honest Jesuit, *P. Belvoir* by Name, assures us on his *Veracity* he had seen and measured, being twenty spaces long, three broad, the Quill three Spans long, and as thick as a Mans Arm. Which story, if we should not fully believe, any more than that of the Popes Finer Feather, we hope we may, for all that, be still good Catholics; because the Jesuit was no Pope; and for the Pope himself, it does not appear that he did pronounce *ex Cathedra, qua Pope*; and from the Infalible Chair, that the individual Feather which he sent, did once stick in the Tail of a *Phoenix*, which had he once done, there had been, without dispute, a Final end of this weighty controversy.

Quest. 2. *There's in America a sort of Snakes call'd Rattle-snakes; and 'tis said, if one of 'em come under a Tree, on which there is a Squirrel, that the Squirrel will run up and down the Tree, from one part to another, without Intermittion; and after some time, being, it's believ'd, weary, makes a very Mournful Noise, and then runs down the body of the tree, on that side the Snake lies, and runs directly into his Mouth. I desire the Reason why the Squirrel does not make its escape, but run thus into the Mouth of its Enemy?*

Ans. If the Story be true, it seems perform'd by a sort of *Fascination*, certain Spirits, 'tis probable, which proceed out of the piercing Eyes of the Snake, so dazzling the poor Squirrel, that he can't escape him, and perhaps too, his Rattle may affright him: Something like what is said of *Kites* and *Chicken*. And *Bochart* tells a story, in his *De Animab. lib. 2. cap. 24.* concerning the *Night-Owl*, that it has its Name *Thijsmith*, from a root that signifies to *Frighten*, to *Stupify*; because he adds, this Bird has been made use of by *Fowlers*, to daze other little Birds. *Aristotle* says, the

proper word for't is *Savvuzem*. And others, That 'tis like a *Witch*, and *fasci*ates those that behold it. All which, perhaps, may be only an extraordinary Fright, at so odd and strange appearances; which not only makes *Owls* and *Squirrels*, but such Creatures as should be wiser, run directly upon those Dangers they seek to avoid.

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